



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

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February 5, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Diplomatic Course of Action with
Respect to Cambodia

DOS, DPMO
reviews
completed.Recommendations:

1. That you authorize a diplomatic course of action that would envisage proceeding gradually--and with full control and possibility of reversal at all stages--to a resumption of diplomatic relations with Cambodia.

Approve _____ Disapprove _____

2. I see three possible means of initiating this course of action.

(a) You personally could outline in a letter our willingness to issue a "border declaration" (described below) and to go further from there;

(b) We could say the same thing in a message from the U.S. Government to the Cambodian Government, delivered by the Australian Ambassador, representing U.S. interests in Cambodia. This way your personal intervention could be held in reserve.

(c) The third course, which I recommend, is that you send a general personal letter to Sihanouk (Tab A), to be followed shortly thereafter by a message through the Australians dealing specifically with a border declaration (Tab B).

Approve _____ Disapprove _____

Discussion

As Mr. Helms noted in the NSC briefing on Viet-Nam, Sihanouk's behavior since mid-1963 has rested on a judgment

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that we would eventually lose in South Viet-Nam. A series of incidents and harassments in 1964 culminated in the suspension of diplomatic relations in May of 1965. Special missions by Ambassador Bonsal in December 1964, Ambassador Bowles in January, 1968, and Eugene Black last September have led to some improvement in understanding, but the basic question remains of what to do about our relations.

In the past few months, Sihanouk has, in our judgment, given a number of signals of a new desire for better relations with the U.S. As always, these have been interspersed with contrary indications and harsh public denunciations. However, we think they add up to something significant. The indications have included:

1. Approaches to the French, Australians, Indonesians, and, most recently, President Marcos of the Philippines, to express interest in better U.S.-Cambodian relations.
2. Release of the 12 American soldiers detained in Cambodia; although their release was long overdue, Sihanouk undoubtedly thought of it as a gracious gesture on his part.
3. Remarks in a press conference about the usefulness of a continuing U.S. presence in Southeast Asia, counterbalancing Chinese ambitions.
4. Dispatch of a Cambodian foreign service officer to Washington to work under the aegis of the French Embassy here as "custodian" of the Cambodian embassy building.
5. A noticeably more moderate reaction to recent border incidents, including a serious and embarrassing one in which a U.S. reconnaissance patrol destroyed a truck, killed eight Cambodian civilians, and captured a ninth.
6. Application for membership in the IMF and IBRD, and reactivation of Cambodian membership in the Asian Development Bank.
7. Expressions of desire for private foreign investment, with the governor of the Cambodian central bank visiting New York to promote investment by U.S. firms.
8. Grant of landing rights to Pan American Airways, after several years of sporadic negotiations.

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On the other side of the coin, NVA/VC use of Cambodian territory has increased. Recent evidence suggests strongly that Cambodia is indeed a major source of military supplies for VC/NVA forces in South Viet-Nam and that the supply route has a high degree of cooperation and connivance at high levels in the Cambodian Government. We cannot ignore these facts but we believe that they reflect essentially Sihanouk's lack of power to control the situation and his constant need to appease Hanoi (and the NLF) as best he can.

On balance, we by no means read the indicators as suggesting that he has now decided we are going to win in SVN. However, he does seem to have concluded that it is time he trimmed ship and hedged his bets.

Basic Options on Diplomatic Courses of Action

A basic question right at the outset is whether it is to our net advantage visibly to improve relations with Cambodia and to move in the direction of a possible resumption of relations. It is my conclusion that--subject to our ironing out as many problems as we can--an eventual resumption of relations, and easing of the atmosphere in the meantime, is to our advantage.

To put the matter in terms of a resumption of relations, the major advantages and disadvantages are as follows:

Advantages

1. A resumption of relations, and to some extent any improvement of our relations, will be construed in the area as a clear sign that Sihanouk thinks we will come out on top. This could have significant favorable consequences in view of his previous position, and is in my judgment the foremost advantage of moving in this direction.
2. Some form of diplomatic relations or U.S. representation would enable us to communicate more effectively than we can now do through the Australians (who represent our interests in Cambodia) or on occasion the French (who are helpful, but to whose skirts we would not wish to be attached).
3. Even a small U.S. representation would give us some intelligence and information gains. If it progressed to the point where we had good military attachés there, with freedom to travel, we might in the end learn a great deal more

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--while the fact that we were watching might operate to tone down the supply activities now taking place through Cambodia.

4. What I do not put forward as a significant advantage is any early hope that even the fullest resumption of diplomatic relations would basically change the military situation or Sihanouk's degree of complicity in the supply line. Nor do I believe that it would cause him, for example, to get behind an enlarged and effective International Control Commission in the face of Hanoi's clear and implacable opposition. These are bridges that he will cross only if he moves significantly farther in his estimate of the outcome in Viet-Nam, although the fact that we have resumed relations could at the eventual stage be a helpful additional factor. But I do not wish to claim that any diplomatic course of action can do much to change the military problem.

Disadvantages

1. Our visible pursuit of a diplomatic course of action directed at easing our relations must, to a significant degree, inhibit any expansion in the authority our forces now have to act along the borders. The views of the Department of Defense on such a course of action are attached (Tab C). They conclude that the full range of courses of action should be evaluated prior to any decision to undertake diplomatic action.

I have read the OSD/Joint Staff comments. I do not think that a study of the full range of courses of action is necessary, because the proposed diplomatic course of action inhibits only major new military actions of a kind which I do not think we should take in any case. The suggestion in the OSD/Joint Staff memo for neutralization of the Cambodia/South Viet-Nam border is fraught with enormous practical difficulties which rule it out as a solution to the immediate problem even in the unlikely event that agreement of the many parties involved could be obtained.

2. Under almost any circumstances, U.S. diplomatic representatives in Cambodia will experience some indignities.

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The Prince is bound to denounce us from time to time, and might in fact do this a bit more as a smokescreen for practical moves in our direction. We will need steady nerves, and will have to be prepared to live with some degree of embarrassment.

3. Much more serious is the possibility of physical violence or a renewed break by Sihanouk. Despite the relatively calm view he has taken of several recent incidents, we simply cannot be sure that we can avoid some really major incident to which he would feel tempted to react. I believe we can partially guard against this possibility by quiet talks before we reach a decision on the resumption of relations. Sihanouk has already told the French Ambassador that he would not treat our representatives as "hostages," and would take a more understanding view of border incidents which might occur after a U.S. border declaration. But an element of risk in this direction would remain in any circumstances.

Net Judgment

From the foregoing, I conclude that it is to our net advantage to move in this direction and it could be to our advantage to go all the way to a full resumption of relations, if we have prepared the way properly.

If this basic judgment is accepted, it leads to the question of pace and timing. To move rapidly or impetuously is obviously unwise. To sit tight and do nothing is in my judgment a neglect of opportunity.

Thus, the option worth following seems to me to be a careful and step-by-step sequence of moves, keeping us in a good public position at all times and designed to lead eventually to a resumption of relations--but without early commitment and with the clear chance to review and change the course of action if it is not doing what we hope for.

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Specific Mechanics

The first step would be a declaration of respect and recognition of the sovereignty, independence, neutrality and territorial integrity of Cambodia within its present frontiers. Sihanouk has repeatedly stated that such a statement, along lines issued by more than 40 countries, is the only pre-condition to improvement and resumption of relations.

This border declaration adds only the four underlined words to what we have consistently said. It commits us to nothing more than is already in the United Nations Charter. In particular, it does not commit us for or against any position in the minor disputes that exist vis-a-vis Thailand, South Viet-Nam, and Laos concerning the present location or basis of Cambodia's frontiers.

We could indicate our willingness to make a border declaration either by a letter from you or through diplomatic channels.

1. A letter from you, as compared to a message through diplomatic channels, has the following advantages:

(a) Sihanouk in recent months has many times made it clear that he attaches special value to communications from the President. In the case of the release of the LCU crew, the message from President Johnson undoubtedly helped the atmosphere immensely.

(b) At the outset of your Administration, it is in any event appropriate for you to lay down fundamental points of your policy toward Cambodia. You alone can convey these with no possibility that Sihanouk would think, as he has tended to do, that he is hearing from the State Department but that the Defense Department and the U.S. military in Viet-Nam have a different policy.

As with all else, there are arguments to the contrary. Sihanouk is notorious for making everything he gets public. If our judgment is wrong or the particular events of the

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moment are unfavorable, he will take it out on you personally --although I must say that he will do this sooner or later in any event if he is in the mood.

2. A second possibility is a sounding carried out by the Australians on our behalf. This would have less immediate impact than a letter from you, but it would have the advantage of reserving such a letter for use at some future stage when its value might be greater. It would not involve you personally in a course of action that could prove fruitless, and it would defer to a later stage any inhibitions on military operating authorities. Moreover, the conversations which the Australian Ambassador would have with Sihanouk at our instance might offer an opportunity to probe, a little more specifically than is possible in a correspondence between heads of state, on such points as his reaction to future border incidents occurring after the issue of a declaration.

3. I recommend a course which combines the advantages and avoids most of the disadvantages of both these tactics. It would begin with a letter from you in general terms, merely expressing polite regards and avoiding discussion of specific problems (Tab A). Such a letter would gratify Sihanouk and would improve the prospects for, without involving you in the specific mechanics of, a move toward resumption of relations. This would be followed by an approach by the Australian Ambassador along the lines of Tab B, which allows an extra degree of explicitness.

However, simultaneously with the despatch of your general letter and before we proceed with the specific approach through the Australians, we must put South Viet-Nam, Thailand, and Laos on clear notice of what we are doing. We would assure them privately that a border declaration does not commit us to any position on specific disputes over border demarcation. On issuing the declaration, we would say publicly only that it speaks for itself, and that we would make similar declarations with respect to Laos, Thailand, and the Republic of Viet-Nam if they so requested. (Any further public comment might lead Sihanouk to charge that we were hedging on our declaration.)

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A year ago, such notice to Cambodia's neighbors might have been exceedingly difficult. However, the latest indications--even from Thai Foreign Minister Thanat--are that they will understand and accept what we are trying to do. I believe you have already established a basic posture of firmness in our Viet-Nam commitment, in Paris, and in relation to Southeast Asia generally--so that there is little chance that this move would be construed as "soft." But I think we have to go through the exercise carefully and hold our fire until we have the returns in hand.

Beyond these opening moves, I am much more tentative at this point. If Sihanouk responds that of course he is ready for a border declaration, then we would go ahead and issue it. It does not commit us to make any change in our present procedures, and would have a few positive advantages beyond improving U.S.-Cambodian relations; for instance, it would bring us back into line with most of our allies, and might help lessen Sihanouk's extreme sensitivity about his frontiers. In issuing a declaration and in all contacts in whatever channel, we would make clear that we had a lot to discuss before we ever came to the point of actually resuming relations, and that we would proceed carefully and slowly. For example, we might send in our first representatives attached to the embassy of our protecting power--as we are now doing in many of the Arab countries. We can test the water at every step, but I simply cannot now forecast the precise sequence of moves that would be indicated.

If of course the Prince ridicules your letter or otherwise displays a negative stance, then we stop in our tracks. I think our losses would be minor, and counterbalanced in many quarters by the visible evidence that we had tried.


William P. Rogers

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